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From Post-political to Agonistic: Warsaw Urban Space since 1989

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The aim of the paper is to analyze Warsaw's urban space since the systemic transformation in 1989. As a theoretical frame I used Chantal Mouffe's critique of post-political public sphere presented in her book *On the Political*. Focusing on the example of Warsaw, I tried to analyze possible manifestations of the post-political condition in architecture and to indicate its various aspects such as lionization of star architects and buildings-icons, globalization (understood, after Hans Ibelings, as the practices of supermodernism in architecture), and the need for westernization of urban space. Following Mouffe's analysis, I also attempted to point out the possibility of "agonistic architecture" as opposed to post-political space.

In her book *On the Political,* Chantal Mouffe adumbrated the notion of the "post-political", characterizing it as a predominant *view which informs the 'common sense' in a majority of western societies*. Mouffe characterizes this condition as a situation in which *the 'free world' has triumphed over communism and, with the weakening of collective identities, a world 'without enemies' is now possible. Partisan conflicts are a thing of the past and consensus can now be obtained through dialogue. Thanks to globalization and the universalization of liberal democracy, we can expect a cosmopolitan future bringing peace, prosperity and the implementation of human rights worldwide.* For Mouffe, post-political, described as an *optimistic view of globalization* characterized by a *consensual form of democracy*, forms an *anti-political vision which refuses to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension constitutive of 'the political'*.[1] The goal of the post-political is to establish an unbiased world free of antagonisms which, according to the author of *On the Political*, is *not only conceptually mistaken,* but also *fraught with political dangers.* For Mouffe, *the belief in the possibility of a universal rational consensus has put democratic thinking on the wrong track. Instead of trying to design the institutions which, through supposedly 'impartial' procedures, would reconcile all conflicting interests and values, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted. (…) There is much talk today of 'dialogue' and 'deliberation' but what is the meaning of such words in the political field, if no real choice is at hand and if the participants in the discussion are not able to decide between clearly differentiated alternatives?*[2]

Mouffe is interested in the potential role of art in the project of an agonistic public sphere. In a text published in a catalogue of Zbigniew Wodiczko's exhibition, she states that *those who advocate the creation of agonistic public spaces aim at unveiling all that is repressed by the dominant consensus (...) According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus,*

that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is about giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony, about bringing out the numerous practices and experiences which constitute the very tissue of a given society, together with the conflicts they entail.[3] For Mouffe, Wodiczko's work makes a valuable contribution to the project of an agonistic public sphere, since he *shows that artistic practices can be a way of giving a voice to those who are marginalized and have no voice.*[4]

Mouffe's views on the post-political as well as her concept of an agonistic public sphere seem to provide a promising tool for analyzing not only art, but also architecture. Looking at contemporary architecture through the prism of these notions might help to understand the crucial processes that shape it and, perhaps, provide a new perspective on the discipline. Using Mouffe's analysis as a point of departure, I would like to take a look at architectural space in Warsaw after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. The fact that architecture is sensitive to sociopolitical issues is perhaps particularly visible in countries situated on the margins of fully developed centers or outside of them, especially in ones where significant changes occur. The need to accelerate political, social or economic procedures intensifies these processes and makes them more visible compared with fully developed countries, as they must take place in the shortest time possible. It can be seen in various fields, such as economy, politics and culture, as well as architecture. New spatial formats connected with the free market and Western capitalism are often hastily implemented to supersede buildings connected with the old system. I would like to focus solely on Warsaw, since due to its status of the capital city, it attracts the most attention from developers and investors. Nevertheless, the phenomena I wish to describe could also be observed in other Polish cities.

Before I move forward and take a closer look at specific examples in Warsaw, first I would like to clarify how the post-political condition can be related to and seen in architecture. To define that, I would like to recall the term "supermodernism", coined by the Dutch

architectural theoretician Hans Ibelings. The author observes *a radical change of direction within architecture during the 1990s, together with the feeling that the new course can be related to the real and putative processes of globalization. (…) A new architecture now seems to be emerging, an architecture for which such postmodernist notions as place, context and identity have largely lost their meaning.*[5] As a point of reference for his theories, Ibelings uses the observations of the French anthropologist Marc Augé presented in his book *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, published in 1995. Augé makes a distinction between place (*lieu*) and space (*espace*). In contemporary, supermodern condition, *place* – defined as an area which acquired meaning as a result of human activities – loses its importance. What is characteristic of our times of late capitalism, is the existence of *non-places* – neutral spaces of transience, connected with increasing mobility and consumption, like airports, hotels or shopping malls. Their distinguishing features are homogeneity, movement, and impossibility of personal attachment, as they provide spatial frames for constant, smooth flow of people. Ibelings relates these observations to particular architectural practices marked with *a new interest in the modernist aesthetic*, *a declining interest in accommodating a symbolic cargo* and *greater importance of visual, spatial and tactile sensations*.[6] For Ibelings, supermodernism, inevitably connected with globalization and thus present in every part of the Western world (and regions under its influence), manifests itself mainly in neutral, superficial buildings designed by such authors as Jean Nouvel, Dominic Perrault, OMA or Toyo Ito. In this sense, *we are closer than ever before to achieving the modernist ideal of a totally transparent architecture.*[7] Less obvious, and therefore more precarious examples of supermodernism are perhaps buildings created within the current of icon-obsessed culture. Although meant to be singular, idiosyncratic and one-of-a-kind, their complex, sculptural shapes full of curves and intrinsic planar intersections (often achieved by means of the same design software) tend to be repetitive and thus as homogeneous as the ubiquitous box of the modernists. Medieval cities competed to erect the highest and most spectacular

cathedrals, and contemporary cities continue this architectural battle, now competing to attract global investment and tourism through iconic buildings. For over a decade, the hackneyed mantra of "the Bilbao effect", despite harsh criticism, has not lost its power. Originality, bizarreness and eccentricity are the desired elements of the common architectural formula of supermodern "spatial product", using Keller Easterling's term.[8] Today's architecture, thanks to the possibilities of CAD/CAM technologies and the rich theoretical framework provided by postmodernism, can be described as a proliferation of bizarre forms, perhaps incomparable with any period before. At the same time, these forms, repeated in different contexts and in many variations, seem to amalgamate into one globalized entity, as homogenous as the rigidly geometric modernist landscape. This uniformity and neutrality corresponds with the post-ideological politics of consensus, in which in order to be successful, political leaders are not expected to confront different beliefs and ideologies, but rather are obliged to perform as celebrities.

The need for architectural icons seems especially visible in countries and regions not considered to be the core part of the Western world, especially in those undergoing significant political changes. In such cases, Poland being one of the examples, one of the leading or even maybe the most important motivation for this desire for icons is legitimizing its westernized identity. In those countries, architecture not only reflects broad social, cultural and political changes, but is also treated as one of its accelerators. Thus, the homogeneity of supermodernism acquires a new meaning and role, helping to become a recognized, fully fledged part of the Western mainstream.

In the case of Warsaw, almost every debate surrounding investments potentially involving star architects makes use of one constantly recalled actor introduced to the cityscape during communist times, but still powerful today – The Palace of Culture and Science. The building, originally known as the Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science, designed by Lev Rudnev, was built between 1952 and 1955. Due to its scale and location in the city center, The Palace soon became a dominant feature

and, introduced and described as a “gift from the Soviet Union to the people of Poland”, a striking visual sign of the Soviet presence.

The Palace stands in the Plac Defilad (literally: Parade Square), used by the government of the People’s Republic of Poland as a place for propaganda parades. The square itself constitutes a fascinating spatial picture of Polish political transformation in a nutshell. After 1989, the immediate surroundings of the Palace became a place of the bourgeoning early capitalism, with a vibrant market place and even a huge amusement park. Although the park was demolished in 1997, a temporary structure of corrugated metal sheltering hundreds of stands with goods remained in the square until 2009.

In 2009, the ephemeral market was demolished in order to make space for the Modern Art Museum building, which is to be realized in 2016. Its design was chosen by a competition organized in 2007 and won by Christian Kerez. The competition gave rise to a heated debate on the “proper” character of the future building, in which the issue of the Palace of Culture occupied a pre-eminent position. Among the most common voices were opinions that the Museum should overshadow the Palace of Culture and that it provided Warsaw with a chance of creating a new icon, suitable for the new times and able to supersede the old one – The Palace. Numerous articles concerning the competition mentioned the potential role of the museum building in the city’s development, and cited the much-quoted example of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. The winner was expected to be a member of the architectural “premier league”, and the most desired author was Frank O. Gehry. Therefore, the verdict in favor of an austere, neo-modern design submitted by the Swiss architect was a huge surprise which fomented many vividly expressed objections. Almost immediately after the announcement of the results, architectural and lifestyle blogs filled with outraged opinions and caricatures deriding its simple appearance and comparing its form to that of a supermarket. The jury’s decision also led to the resignation of the Museum's director, who advocated the project by ALA Architects, Grupa 5 and Jarosław Kozakiewicz, which would

fulfill Warsaw's dream of a new spectacular city icon to a greater extent.[9] A simple, ascetic building turned out to be capable of engendering a serious architectural debate in a society with a rather low consciousness of the importance of design and an equally low interest in it. Moreover, it even led to a major change in the Museum's prestigious institution. Bearing this example in mind, it is hard to question the power and agency of architecture.

The Modern Art Museum building was not the first attempt to overshadow the Palace of Culture. In 1989, a serious rival was erected in its neighborhood – the Marriott Hotel. It could not compete with the Soviet giant in height (it is still 60 m shorter than the 230-meter Palace), but became a symbol of the new capitalist order superseding the old regime. The Marriott Hotel was designed by three Polish architects: Jerzy Skrzypczak, Andrzej Bielobradek and Krzysztof Stefański as a simple rectangular high-rise with reflective glass facade. It represents corporate architecture of the late international style, present abundantly in every major American or European city. It could hardly be labeled as outstanding or innovative, but it is precisely this similarity to other buildings belonging to the same architectural tradition and ideology that seems to have decided about its symbolical impact and power. The building, together with the urban myths surrounding it, soon became a legend equal to The Palace of Culture. The Marriott played a crucial role in cult TV series and movies from the 1990s, providing a setting for the protagonists' struggles with the reality of early capitalism, *Marriott Sunday Brunch* became an intrinsic part of the new, cosmopolitan lifestyle of the aspiring middle class, and a wedding or prom in the Marriott ballroom was a sign of a high social status. Before Marriott, places associated with the Western capitalism were made available only through TV series, such as the extremely popular American soap opera *Dynasty*. The hotel made it real, tangible and within reach. A part of the Marriott legend is that in the 1990s it served as informal headquarters for the first American businessmen coming to Poland, who – as the hotel denizens – soon earned the name *Marriott Boys*. One of the journalists documenting this phenomenon wrote: *Their presence*

turned the hotel into a small island of American luxury, especially striking in comparison with the harsh everyday reality of the first years of the Polish transformation. Some of the guests agreed to sleep in an adapted conference room with the bathroom located in the corridor, just because they wanted to get a place in this usually overbooked hotel. (...) The myth of the Marriott grew so fast that for some time the Polish Ministry of Treasury opened its information point there.[10]

The Mariott Hotel thus became the main symbolic rival to the Palace of Culture but did not extirpate its presence and importance. From 1989 on, along with the opinions supporting the idea of the Palace's demolition (voiced even today), a panoply of various ideas on how to overshadow the Palace has been presented. These suggestions, connected with the idea of creating the so-called *Warsaw Manhattan*, are based on the conviction that its overwhelming dominance should be counterbalanced by a proliferation of high-rise buildings in the city center. In the last years, this discourse has been enriched with the need for icons and the lionization of star architects. One of the most fervently discussed possibilities of a building being designed by a world-famous star architect in Warsaw was *Lilium Tower*, presented in 2007. The developer invited Zaha Hadid to design a high-rise (257 m high) apartment and hotel building in the city center, in close proximity to the Palace of Culture. Its realization, which would require the demolition of the Central Railway Station (one of the most interesting examples of late modern railway station buildings in Europe) and a school, raised voices of dissent.[11] Nevertheless, the project was greatly appreciated by the municipal government and received the highest accolade from Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, the mayor of Warsaw. *I have always wanted our capital city to be a place in which international and Polish architects could compete, leaving here a testimony of our times. I also wanted Warsaw to become a European capital city of the 21st century* – said the mayor during press conference. – *I am really happy that Warsaw attracts architectural celebrities. I imagine that it will have its Manhattan, which will finally overcome the Palace of Culture complex.*[12] These words are quite telling and typical for the discussion on urban space in Poland,

repeated over and over again during debates surrounding almost every important architectural competition for Warsaw. *Lilium Tower*, with its trivialized streamlined shape and tawdry "futuristic" appeal, is clearly one of the standardized architectural products that leave Hadid's design factory every year.

The idea of *Lilium Tower* was abandoned due to the financial crisis in 2008, but by the end of 2013 another competitor of the Palace of Culture is expected to be completed in its immediate vicinity, namely *Złota 44*, an apartment complex designed in 2008 by Daniel Liebeskind. Libeskind underlined the importance of the Palace of Culture in his project: *The site for Złota 44 in Warsaw was familiar to me because I grew up in post-war Poland. The Palace of Culture – that oppressive gift of Stalin – is just across the street. For me, it always cast a shadow of Communism over the city. I decided that the design had to address this particular condition. Złota 44 brings back the sweep of the Polish eagle, which penetrates the entire building. It's a display of optimism and a celebration of the beauty of Warsaw.*[13] *Złota 44* was designed, says the architect, *to represent a new direction for Poland, east and west. It is a response to the destruction of Warsaw and the post-war Russian reconstruction (…). This is not another corporate building that keeps Warsaw as a tabula rasa. It is a building that embraces the aspirations of Warsaw and is mindful of its economic circumstances. (…) This building will address a major shift in major cities around the world, where residential buildings will emerge as the most striking designs. The building embraces the complex history of the site and the aspirations of Warsaw. It is a unique building shaped by Warsaw's soul and light.*[14]

Although Libeskind's description is full of platitudes and bombastic rhetoric, underlining the aspect of Warsaw's aspirations realized in the form of the building seems to be very accurate. For Warsaw's authorities the fact that both Libeskind and Hadid came up with banal architecture, well-known from almost every major Western city, does not affect the quality of these ideas. Quite the contrary: like in the case of the Marriott Hotel in Warsaw when it was not the originality of the design that decided its success, their banality is an advantage – the goal is to blend in with

the image of Western European and North American cities.

The need to amalgamate with the West manifests itself also in the efforts of the authorities to erase small street trade from major cities, because its chaotic nature resembles rather unruly Eastern bazaars than the idea of a clean, tidy, and antiseptic European city. The demolition of the market place in the area surrounding the Palace, the liquidation of *Jarmark Europa* at the Warsaw 10th-Anniversary Stadium (*Stadion Dziesięciolecia*) (one of the largest bazaars in Eastern Europe) in 2007, and a constant struggle with street vendors are examples of the efforts the authorities make to impose a westernized order and to bring Warsaw closer to Berlin than to Moscow. Erasing or at least limiting street trade as well as promoting "cosmopolitan" or "international" architecture seems to stem from the same source and serve the same purpose. A post-political, homogenous cityscape seamlessly merging with every other city associated with the West seems to be the goal of Warsaw's authorities ever since 1989. Seemingly, the idea allows for singular bizarre architectural forms, but this multifariousness is only illusory. They all blend in a uniform environment, created within a neoliberal reality.

If we are to use Chantal Mouffe's analysis and the theoretical system she proposed consequently, we should probably think of the possible alternatives to post-political spaces and try to conceptualize the idea of *agonistic architecture*. In order to show a way of understanding the agonistic in architecture and how it can be manifested, I will describe a project that – although never intentionally declared to be *agonistic* – seems to provide an interesting perspective on the interpretation of that notion in architecture. The project called *Marketmeter*, designed by Ola Wasilkowska in 2011, enables street vendors to sell their products with the use of a system similar to that of parking meters. In selected zones in the city, pull-out display tables would be built into the surface of sidewalks. Certain amount of money paid to the *MarketMeter* would unblock the table and cause it to emerge from the ground. After the pre-paid trading time has run out, the table would sink back into the pavement. The trading zones and the general time frame would

be regulated by the city authorities. *MarketMeters* would give the right to use public space to those who are deprived of it. *Street trade* – writes Wasilkowska – *creates a fluctuating and self-organizing informal city space*. *(…) The process of planning and modernizing Warsaw is moving toward the standardization of public space. Informal spaces, the users of which are often the least privileged of social groups, are driven out to the periphery of the city. Public microspaces at grass-roots level, such as bazaars, are being replaced by controlled chains, and the green space is being taken over by car parks or granite walkways. Warsaw authorities have consistently followed a policy of sterilization and are liquidating all vegetable stalls in central Warsaw, even those that have operated there for decades and are popular among locals. Yet street trade has existed in Warsaw for centuries and has fitted perfectly into the landscape of the capital.*[15] Thanks to *MarketMeters,* street vendors, increasingly replaced by global retail companies and unwelcome in the city (as they do not fit into the idea of the westernized spatial order), would now have a right to speak. In this sense *agonistic architecture* would perform the same function which Mouffe sees in Wodiczko's art – it *unveils all that is repressed by the dominant consensus*, in this case a consensus defined in economical and spatial terms.

MarketMeters might seem not radical enough for the project of *agonistic architecture*. After all, it is the city authorities who decide on specific regulations regarding the stands. Nevertheless, the concept of *agonistic architecture* shouldn't be equated or confused with anarchistic architecture. While describing Elias Canetti's vision of parliamentary system, Mouffe states clearly *that the establishment of 'agonistic' relations was the task of democratic politics* and that *thanks to democratic institutions, conflicts can be staged in a way which is not antagonistic but agonistic*.[16] Following this logic, agonistic architecture could be a way to highlight various voices, especially those of the underprivileged, not in an impossible attempt to reconcile the opposing factions (as the accommodation of conflicting interests of small street vendors and global supermarket chains is impossible), but to give them the right to speak. Perhaps, if at all possible, the project of *agonistic*

architecture could be realizable in bottom-up spatial practices rather than in big architectural projects. In art, especially in critical art, Mouffe's vision is easier to be realized than in architecture. Minorities or under-represented groups have limited possibilities of speaking through architecture, as it usually involves means available to the privileged, dominating groups. Putting *agonistic architecture* into practice would provide a space for expression for those who are deprived of the right to use the city. What Wasilkowska mentions as one of the goals of her project is that *perhaps after some time, street trade in Warsaw may be recognized as a fully legal activity that can greatly contribute to the city, leading to the elevation of street trade itself to the rank of other forms of trade.*[17] Even if the project does not lead to such a change, its value lies in the qualities similar to those Chantal Mouffe sees in Wodiczko's art: *unveiling all that is repressed by the dominant consensus (...) making visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is about giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony, about bringing out the numerous practices and experiences which constitute the very tissue of a given society, together with the conflicts they entail.*[18]

Post-political architecture serves as a catalyst for change towards a westernized, homogeneous cityscape, however, considering an opposite situation is certainly worthwhile: architecture which would underline differences and contrasts that cannot be reconciled. It is precisely this contrast that decides the very specific and unique character of the city, and not the repetitive and predictable "icons" signed by star architects.

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[1] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routlege 2005), 1-2.

[2] Mouffe, *On the Political,* 3.

[3] Chantal Mouffe, "Agonistic Public Spaces and Democratic Politics", in exh. cat *Krzysztof Wodiczko. Pomnikoterapia*, ed. Andrzej Turowski, (Warsaw: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki 2005), 11-12, transl. by L. Klein.

[4] Mouffe, Agonistic Public Spaces and Democratic Politics", 11-12.

[5] Hans Ibelings, *Supermodernism. Architecture in the Age of Globalisation*, (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 1998), 10.

[6] Ibelings, *Supermodernism*, 129-133.

[7] Ibelings, *Supermodernism,* 102.

[8] Keller Easterling, *Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and Its Political Masquerades*, (Cambridge, Mass.:The MIT Press, 2005).
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[9] It is perhaps telling that in the visualizations showing its design, the Palace of Culture is literally overshadowed – its contours are blurred and melt into the cloudy background.

[10] Rafał Woś, "How American Cowboys Brought Wild Capitalism to Poland"*, Dziennik,* October 22, 2010, accessed October 10, 2011, http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/artykuly/306387,jak-amerykanscy-kowboje-przyniesli-polsce-dziki-kapitalizm.html, transl. by L. Klein.

[11] Grzegorz Piątek, „Zaha Hadid's building will not rescue Warsaw", *Gazeta Stołeczna*, accessed October 10, 2011, http://szukaj.wyborcza.pl/Archiwum/0,0.html.

[12] "Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz's Meeting With Zaha Hadid", Accessed October 10, 2011, http://www.urbanity.pl/wiadomosc2660/spotkanie-hanny-gronkiewicz-waltz-z-zaha-hadid, transl. by L.Klein.

[13] „Zlota 44", accessed October 10, 2011, http://www.e-architect.co.uk/poland/zlota_44_warsaw.htm.

[14] "Zlota 44 Project Brief", accessed October 10, 2011, http://www.daniel-libeskind.com/projects/show-all/zlota-44/.

[15] Aleksandra Wasilkowska, „MarketMeter. A Creeping Trade", in *Reduction/Micro-spaces. Synchronicity*, ed. Bogna Świątkowska (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2010), 165-166, transl. by L. Klein.

[16] Mouffe, *On The Political*, 21-22.

[17] Wasilkowska, "MarketMeter", 167.

[18] Mouffe, "Agonistic Public Spaces and Democratic Politics", 11-12.